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From: London, No. 758 FEBRUARY 15, 1950

Subject: British Press on the Question of King Leopold's Return.

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There has been very little editorial comment in the British press on the passage by the Belgian Parliament of a bill providing for a referendum on the question of the King's return.

The principal editorial on the subject which has appeared to date was printed by the Times (Independent, Conservative) of February 11, 1950. Copies of this article are enclosed. It may be of particular interest inasmuch as the views expressed parallel very closely those held by the Foreign Office. Some of the key statements contained in the article are quoted below:

"..... it is now sure that Belgium will be rent by a division of opinion more violent and bitter than any known during her history as an independent State..... as M. Spaak has pointed out, the rejection of the King (for this is a referendum not upon the monarchical principle but upon the person of King Leopold) in these circumstances may make it impossible, or at least extremely difficult, for his heir, Prince Baudouin, to come to the throne.....

"..... It would have been simpler and better for the national interest if the King had chosen abdication or effacement. He did not, and it can no doubt be argued that he is entitled to have to obtain his people's view, even though this may in fact drag the monarchy down to the level of a political party and risk a dangerous fissure in the land.....

"..... As matters stand, even the referendum, with all the bitter campaign and possible turbulence that will precede it, will not be the last word. That rests with Parliament, to whom, with the Regent and the King, the result of the referendum will be reported. It will then be for Parliament to decide whether King Leopold's 'impossibility/

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FEWillis:mcm
February 14, 1950

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'impossibility to reign,' declared in 1945, can be ended. A difficult and anxious time is ahead for the Belgians."

Frances E. Willis

Frances E. Willis
First Secretary of Embassy

FEWillis:mcm
Copy for American Embassy, Brussels

Enclosure: /Copies of article from the Times of February 11, 1950 entitled "Cleavage in Belgium."

DATE: 11 1950

Cleavage in Belgium

With the passing by both Houses of the Belgian Parliament of a Bill arranging a referendum on the question of the KING's return to his country, it is now sure that Belgium will be rent by a division of opinion more violent and bitter than any known during her history as an independent State. The referendum is to be carried out regionally and not nationally. Votes will be counted district by district and—with a cleavage between the southern Walloons, who are against the KING, and the Flemings of the north, who are for him—this procedure may well mean that one-half of the country will to a large degree be set against the other half. Division will come, too, between clericals and anti-clericals and between political right and left. Not only is Belgian unity likely to be severely shaken. In addition, as M. SPAAK has pointed out, the rejection of the KING (for this is a referendum not upon the monarchical principle but upon the person of KING LEOPOLD) in these circumstances may make it impossible, or at least extremely difficult, for his heir, PRINCE BAUDOUIN, to come to the throne.

These dangers have long been foreseen. They partly account for the fact that it has only been possible to pass the Bill for a referendum after the political changes of last summer, when the elections increased the Christian Social strength in Parliament. Even now the vote in the House of Representatives was carried only by the support of some of the Liberal party, who appear to dislike the prospect of the referendum as much as any but feel that it is the only possible answer to this "royal question" which has bedevilled Belgian politics ever since the war. The KING himself has steadfastly refused either to abdicate or voluntarily to step aside in favour of his son. What KING LEOPOLD did or did not do in 1940 may no longer be of great relevance, especially since the last word on his case, even in its constitutional aspect, has probably still to be spoken and the truth, in this tangled contention, is hard to come by. What matters now is to end the long period of embittered suspense in Belgium. It would have been simpler and better for the national interest if the KING had chosen abdication or effacement. He did not, and it can no doubt be argued that he is entitled to have to obtain his people's view, even though this may in fact drag the monarchy down to the level of a political party and risk a dangerous fissure in the land.

The KING has said that he will not contemplate a return "if the number of votes recorded in his favour failed to reach a minimum of 55 per cent. of the total valid votes." This means, presumably, that he would consider resuming his constitutional prerogatives even if just under half of the electorate were against him—as it may well be. This would not be easy to reconcile with the idea of a constitutional monarch standing above and beyond party or sectional interests. How, in practice, LEOPOLD could return as King of the Belgians without adequate support from both Walloons and Flemings is hard to see. The Socialists, even though in principle against the referendum, have expressed their readiness to accept a 66 per cent. vote in his favour as conclusive. As matters stand, even the referendum, with all the bitter campaign and possible turbulence that will precede it, will not be the last word. That rests with Parliament, to whom, with the REGENT and the KING, the result of the referendum will be reported. It will then be for Parliament to decide whether KING LEOPOLD'S "impossibility to reign," declared in 1945, can be ended. A difficult and anxious time is ahead for the Belgians.